

The Senate Families, Seniors and Human Services Committee  
Room 210, Farnum Building  
123 W. Allegan St.  
Lansing, MI 48933

Mindy Nathan  
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April 11, 2016

Esteemed Members of the Senate Committee,

I write in support of the changes to SB 405, 406, 407 and 408, as introduced by Sen. Tonya Schuitmaker and Sen. Judy Emmons, to prohibit the suspension or expulsion of a student for being truant or chronically absent.

Key to ensuring the best educational outcomes for all students is a school climate that does not stress zero tolerance for good students who may be struggling with issues that lead to misconduct. We as educators should have the ability to discipline students appropriately. That is why I appreciate your efforts here to do away with mandatory exclusions for truancy, and I also ask you to consider further amending 380.1311 in SB 405 to provide educators more discretion for those mandatory expulsion offenses that do not currently include needed exceptions. In my experience there are many situations that require some individual consideration, where mandatory expulsion is not in the student's best interest.

From April of 2007 through last June (2015), I ran an alternative high school program for the Berkley School District. During our nine years of operation, we graduated over 900 students – most of whom had come to us from other districts, particularly Detroit, Southfield and Oak Park. Most of our students had been unsuccessful in large, traditional high school settings. We were 100% direct certification for the federal free lunch program – most of our kids lived well below the poverty line.

In accordance with the advised changes in this set of bills, we found that in most cases, truancy was a symptom of deeper issues. We found that our students needed support and understanding, often with the help of Human Services agencies and/or Community Mental Health. Connecting students with services after an expulsion is too late; what we discovered is that often truancy was a sign of deeper trauma, and certainly not the fault of the student.

During our last school year, we had a partnership with University of Michigan's Schools of Education and Social Work. Graduate level teaching and social work interns were engaged for the entire year with our students, teachers, counselor and administrators, as well as UM professors, in an in-depth study of the impacts of trauma on young people and their success in school. What we learned is that the typical list of qualities ascribed to "at-risk" youth – truancy high among them, as well as mental health concerns (primarily anxiety and depression), substance abuse, self-injuring behaviors, negative self-image and low self-esteem, as well as low motivation, interaction with the criminal justice system, school phobia, and more, could most often be traced back to incidents (ongoing or episodic) of serious trauma.

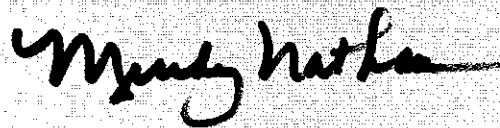
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In the work that we did to identify best teaching practices that would support and heal traumatized youth, it was clear that these students needed to be in school! They were most successful in a setting that could meet their complex, yet often predictable needs. As we become more knowledgeable about the emotional and physical wounds that our children carry with them, the good news is that many of them can be helped; many will thrive with the right support. Mostly they need adults who are skilled at forming strong, healthy, healing relationships.

Often the first sign we will see in a child is truancy; expelling these students from school can cut off a powerful lifeline. These children must be in schools that welcome and support them.

Thank you again for making these important changes. This added language has the potential to save many children who deserve a chance to become healthy, well-educated, contributing adults.

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mindy Nathan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The background of the signature area is a light gray, textured rectangular box.

Mindy Nathan